
UNIT 7 POST-MODERN*

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7.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, you will read what is meant by postmodernism and about the main thinkers associated with it. After going through this unit, you should be able to:

- Explain the meaning of postmodernism;
- Discuss different views on it;
- Describe the relationship between postmodernism and post structuralism; and
- Analyze the link between postmodernism and globalization.

7.1 INTRODUCTION

Postmodernism is considered as a sharp reaction against the predominance of modernism. Modernism was the product of the industrial era when the traditional method of explanation and expression got replaced by ‘reason’ and ‘science’. The fundamental attributes of reason and science are to formulate grand narratives and theories. Postmodernism emerged as a radical alternative to modernity. It argues that modernism is too centralized and monolithic in nature and so it suppresses the minor identities and voices. It rejects the notion of a single meaning of truth. It challenges the various established and settled assumptions pertaining to society, culture and the nature of knowledge. It corroded the fundamental foundations of epistemology in general and the practices of social sciences in particular. It advocates multiplicity of narratives and refutes the possibility of meta-narratives. Although postmodernism is a major trend in theory of knowledge, there is little consensus on its origin. The term was *first* used in an article published in 1914 in “The Hibbert Journal” by *J. M. Thompson*. The article described the transformation in attitude and beliefs within the Christian

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society of that time. Later, the concept of postmodernism gained currency in architecture and literary criticism as a tool to describe and explain the dissatisfaction with modern architecture and deconstruct the literary texts to demystify the hidden power-knowledge relationship. Since the 19th century, it has been embraced by all disciplines such as architecture, literature, art, philosophy, ethics, political science, sociology, anthropology, economics, penology etc. with different emphases within each of these disciplines. Postmodernism is arguably considered a bucket of ambiguity with its *distrust* towards everything and lacking of any clear cut directions. This fundamental nature of postmodernism makes it difficult to provide one all-embracing definition as it often seeks to grasp what escapes the processes of simple definitions and celebrates what resists or disrupts them. Even there is disagreement among postmodernists on whether postmodernity is continuous with modernity or represents a radical break with it; or are they engaged in a long-running relationship with one another with postmodernity continually pointing out the limitation of modernity. Although, the reactions of postmodernist thinkers like Lyotard, Derrida, and Foucault are against the project of enlightenment, within which they constructed their theories, this has brought some uniformity in their works. The glimpse of such uniformities has resulted in to categorization and characterisation of the concept by critical thinkers such as Terry Eagleton.

Postmodernism is a style of thought which is suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity, of the ideas of universal progress or emancipation, of single frameworks, grand narratives or ultimate grounds of explanation. Against these enlightenment norms, it sees the world as contingent, ungrounded, diverse, unstable, indeterminate, a set of disunited cultures or interpretations which breed a degree of skepticism about the objectivity of truth, history and norms, the ‘givenness’ of natures and the coherence of identities. In order to understand the essence of postmodernism, it is necessary to have a look at the original writings of some key postmodern thinkers like Lyotard, Derrida and Foucault, Laclou and Mouffe.

Check Your Progress 1

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.
 ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) What do you understand by postmodernism?

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7.2 MAIN POST-MODERN THINKERS

7.2.1 Jean Francois Lyotard

Jean Francois Lyotard, the French political philosopher and cultural critic, is one of the most influential figures of postmodern philosophy. His book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* is considered a Bible of

Postmodernism and supplies a coherent conceptualization of it. It surveys the status of science and technology, examines the condition and the changing nature of knowledge and emphasizes replacement of grand narratives by little narratives in the postmodern era. He subscribes to *Daniell Bell* and *Allen Touraine's* analysis of the fundamental change of industrial society in a post-industrial society in which knowledge is the principle force of production and applies the same to explain postmodernity. He writes:

“Our working hypothesis is that the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the post-industrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age.”

Lyotard argues that in the postmodern era, knowledge has become a *commodity* (knowledge driven economy) that is a key mean of surviving, flourishing and making profits (power). Consequently, knowledge for knowledge's *sake* and for achieving universal and emancipatory objectives upheld by western modernity are becoming less important to social survival because of science's rapid technological innovation within the aspects of language, linguistic theories, communications, cybernetics, computers and computed languages, informatics, information storage and data banks. He writes:

“Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold; it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange.”

For him, whoever controls such knowledge now exerts political control. He presumes that knowledge will become a source of conflict between nations in future and therefore, future *wars* will be fought over access to information, *not* over territory or ideology. He holds that the dominance of such power oriented knowledge in postmodern era signifies the collapse of universal emancipatory project of modernity (enlightenment). He further insists that knowledge is *neither* scientific nor totally value-free in that it is dependent on narratives — the ways in which the world is understood through the stories we tell about it. For gaining legitimacy. He rejects the totalizing tendencies of history and society; what he calls “grand narratives” like Marxism. Grand/metanarratives are those theories and structures that claim to be able to explain everything and Lyotard emphasizes resisting their position. Like Nietzsche's declaration of the death of God, Lyotard declared the death of three metanarratives — Christianity, liberal humanism and Marxism.

“Whether metanarratives are invoked to support the sciences (revelation of truth), political movements (emancipation of humanity) or artistic movements (achieving deeper visions), they no longer provide the legitimacy they did in the modern era.”

He highlights that there are countless little narratives that jockey for position and begging for our attention and allegiance with *no* single truth (metanarrative) and metanarratives as totalizing structures that underpinned modernity no longer provide a base for critique or action in the contemporary postmodern world. Instead interventions must be local and provisional, and can *no* longer justify themselves on the basis of universal theories. This led Lyotard to call postmodern as ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’. In a nutshell, Lyotard emphasized the refutation of scientific rationality paradigm and advocated multiple wisdoms, cultures and relativism of knowledge. As he says — “Let us wage a war on totality, let us celebrate Differences.”

7.2.2 Jacques Derrida

Jacques Derrida is a French philosopher best known for developing a form of semiotic analysis known as *Deconstruction*, which he discussed in numerous texts, and developed in the context of phenomenology. He is one of the major figures associated with post-structuralism and postmodern philosophy. The term deconstruction was first used by him in his book *Of Grammatology* and it unprecedentedly questioned assumptions of the Western *philosophical* tradition and also more broadly, Western culture. Derrida called his challenge to the assumptions of Western culture as deconstruction. He *refused* to provide a clear and concrete definition of what deconstruction actually means, and described his own writings as a series of ongoing attempts to figure that out. As he writes:

“All my essays are an attempt to have it out with this formidable question”.

The term deconstruction has been used by his followers and others *beyond* the specific context in which Derrida employs it and has *consistently* been *misconstrued* as an assault against all forms of reasoning. A deep examination of Derrida’s texts reveals that deconstruction (as Derrida uses it) is an active movement (rather than a method) which, by chasing meaning to its *aporias*, seeks to demonstrate its dependence on that irreducible alterity which refuses to further passage. However, essentially, it is a particular mode of philosophical and literary analysis of reading *texts* to reveal conflicts, silences, contradictions and fissures. By doing close readings of the texts of Plato, Heidegger, Husserl, Nietzsche, Austin, Marx, Rousseau, Saussure and Freud, Derrida often picks out an apparently marginal comment or motif and makes it central to his account, showing a text’s internal tensions and contradictions, the moments when it undermines its own central messages and meanings. It is not that *he* (reader) deconstructs texts, rather they deconstruct themselves, hence his claim that deconstruction defies definition and is not, strictly speaking, a method at all. For example, in a reading of Plato’s *Phaedrus in Dissemination*, Derrida explores the double and contradictory meanings of Pharmakon as both a remedy and a poison.

Derrida’s theory of deconstruction is a reaction against the old assumption of the presence of a stable centre, objectivity and absolute truth held commonly by what he calls logocentrism — western philosophy’s search for a foundation to all knowledge. In a logic or reason or truth which is self-evident, self-confirming-Phonocentrism (privileging of *speech* over writing) and linguistic structuralism in favor of a hermeneutics type of suspicion about these categories. For Derrida, deconstructive strategy starts from the idea that the metaphysical, epistemological, ethical and logical systems of the past (logocentrism) were constructed on the basis of conceptual oppositions (*binary* oppositions) such as transcendental / empirical, internal / external, original / derivative, good / evil, universal / particular and God / devil. One of the terms in each binary set of hierarchy is privileged, the other suppressed or excluded. By analyzing the *marginalized* terms and the nature of their exclusion, deconstruction seeks to demonstrate that the preference for one term over its opposite is ultimately unjustifiable. The privileged term has meaning only so far as it is contrasted with its ostensibly excluded opposite. In other words, the privileged term is *constituted* by what it suppresses, which will inevitably return to haunt it. Thus, the privileged term never achieves perfect identity or conceptual purity; it is

always parasitic on or contaminated by the marginalized term. In this way, Derrida by virtue of deconstruction demonstrates that there is *no* such thing as pure presence or an absolute origin or foundation or stable nature of meaning claimed by the western philosophy (logocentrism or metaphysics of presence). Further, against the tradition of phonocentrism, Derrida *prioritizes* writing. In the very first chapter entitled *The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing* in his work *Of Grammatology*, Derrida argues:

“The death of the book undoubtedly announced..... nothing but a death of speech and a new mutation in the history of writing.”

What is the issue for him is the so-called fixity of meaning privileged by speech, and the polysemy associated with writing. The core of his argument here is that phonocentrism is a duplicitous way of making the self-presence of consciousness a primary reality that can be signified. However, for Derrida speech is not aware of the gap between the word as sound and the infinity of possible meaning. Speech in effect is a poor form of writing. Writing however makes us aware that meaning incorporates and generates endless difference. Further, for Derrida the written text- because of difference (neologism created by him particularly to express the indeterminacy of meaning) - necessarily becomes disengaged from the intentions of the writer. Intentionality and authorship in general are dismissed. Derrida rather celebrates readers who construct their *own* meaning. As he puts it:

“The idea of the book, which always refers to a natural totality, is profoundly alien to the sense of writing.”

Against the linguistic structuralism of Saussure and Levi-Strauss, Derrida emphasizes what he calls the inter-textuality method and argues that we can never master language. Representation can *never* indicate a presence, since it must always involve the recognition of permanent difference implicit in the signs we use, which implies in turn endless deferral or infinite signification. In a nutshell, for Derrida all foundations are dead. The central aim of deconstruction is to expose logocentrism (metaphysics) and phonocentrism prevalent in the history of western thought from Plato onwards. It shows us the unfamiliar at the heart of the familiar by destabilizing the myth of fixed meaning, by exposing the unrationalized paradoxes, and by highlighting the endless deferred play of meaning in language. Rather than attempting to find a true meaning, a consistent point of view or unified message in a given work, a deconstructive reading carefully teases out, to use Barbara Johnson's words, 'the warring forces of signification' at play and waiting to be read in what might be called the textual unconscious.

7.2.3 Michel Foucault

Michel Foucault, French philosopher and historian is one of the preeminent postmodern theorists. His works cut across the disciplinary boundaries of political science, sociology, philosophy, history and deal with almost *all* major thematic fields like psychiatry, medicine, linguistics, penal practice, prisons, and sexual conduct to articulate systems of thought about human beings. He employed two complementary methods in his works: (a) Archaeology of Knowledge in early works; and (b) Genealogy of Power in later ones. Archaeology focuses on a given historical *moment*, while genealogy is concerned with a historical process.

The constant and driving force in both these Foucaultian methods is what Foucault calls discourse to bring to light the surface-level principles that mark out ways of subject's thinking and acting. As an ensemble of speech practices that carry values, classifications and meanings, discourse simultaneously constructs a truth about subjects, and constitutes subjects in terms of this truth regime. While employing the archaeological method in his early works, such as *Madness and Civilization* and *The Order of Things*, Foucault brought two postmodernist themes to light: (a) Foucault rejected the enlightenment project of humanism (human self as an independent entity) as his focus was on discourse as practice rather than on human subject as abstract being, as the structuralists do; and (b) against structuralism and liberal humanism. He rejected the themes of the history of ideas, such as the genesis of ideas, their continuity and the process of totalizations by arguing that discourses were not fixed and closed within one place, but rather dispersed across a range of sites, times and activities. For example, in examining the changing conceptualization of madness in his *Madness and Civilization* (1965), Foucault noted the shift from a discourse that constructed madness as a form of moral corruption — resolved at one point by the expulsion of the mad from society — to a scientific practice in which madness was the *obverse* of reason, an internal dysfunction of the mind whose sufferers were best confined and, later, treated as victims of mental illness by experts (those possessing reason) within medical institutions. In these shifts from one discourse to another, new forms of authority, power, social subjectivity and institutional organization were fashioned, as for Foucault discourses are *not* simply isolated patterns of speech but organizing principles embedded in wider patterns of social organization and practice. Therefore, there is *no* single universal truth and domination is never complete and never total.

In his later works, Foucault modified his idea of discourse through genealogical analyses of, for example, punishment and sexuality, wherein he examined the complex and contingent emergence of contemporary systems of social discipline and knowledge. Here, discourse was not conceived as autonomous formation of statements within a specific setting, but as a dynamic meeting point between power and knowledge. Having been heavily influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Foucault remarks that genealogical analyses reveal the *hidden* structures that support *not* just the knowledge base of societies, but also its ideology and power relations; and also reveal that discourse, ideas and universal truths are riddled with human intervention and implicated within the maintenance of society's conformity. Consequently, there is *no* objective knowledge as claimed by modernity. Within critical theory, the work of Foucault provides a comprehensive analysis of power. Against traditional models (that is Marxist and liberal approaches) of power, Foucault argues that power is neither located in a class nor in an individual, but is rather diffused throughout the social structure and is exercised within and through it. As he puts it:

“Power is never localised here or there, but rather employed and exercised through a net-like organisation”.

His theorization of power is:

- Power is only ever exercised through relationships (Foucault analyzed power relations and not power itself); that is, power relations in their distinct modalities, strategies, tactics, practices and techniques.

- All social relations are relations of power, enabling to uncover the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects.
- Power is fundamentally a bottom-up feature of social interaction (micro-power).
- Power is positive, productive and constitutive rather than negative, prohibitive and repressive, even though it may occasionally take the form of domination; that is, it brings into being meanings, subjects, and social orders- these are its effects rather than its material or it's a priori;
- There are no relations of power without resistance as resistance always means empowering oneself; one is simply reconstituting a relationship of power.
- Knowledge and power are mutually constitutive and therefore cannot be separated; Foucault, in fact, preferred the terminology power / knowledge.
- Power is impersonal and flows through or insinuates language, knowledge and institutional practices; and (i) power and freedom are not opposites insofar as there is no subject, and hence no freedom, outside of power. Thus, he regards the notion of sovereign power as inadequate for understanding the diverse modalities of power at work in modern societies. As he puts it:

“Political theory in general has never ceased to be obsessed with the person of sovereign. What we need, however, is a political philosophy that isn't erected around the problem of sovereignty. We need to cut off the king's head: in political theory that has still to be done.”

Foucault holds that liberal democracies function not through the threat of death and orders, but rather by what he calls governmentality or disciplinary power or bio-power, meaning regulation and disciplining of mass population and their behaviours by virtue of creating in them a sense of freedom which acts as a mechanism for disciplining disparate populace into governing themselves. A popular example he gave in his *Discipline and Punish* of this process in action was that of the increasing use of surveillance within society, which is being justified in the name of enhancing freedom of movement and security; in reality, though, it makes us all censor our own behavior in case we are caught on camera. For Foucault, government of our society is not confined to the sphere of state only, but rather norms (performing the role of surveillance) pertaining to our social institutions — family, educational institutions, prisons, hospitals, religious places — govern over our bodies (docile bodies) by disciplining and normalizing our activities contributing to the rise of what he calls a carceral society, silence of human liberation and above all enhancement of economic and political needs of the state.

Governmentality, therefore, draws upon without unifying, centralizing, or rendering systematic or even consistent, a range of powers and knowledge dispersed across modern societies. However, Foucault is not arguing that governmentality chronologically supersedes sovereignty and rule. He remarks:

“We need to see things not in terms of the replacement of a society of sovereignty by a disciplinary society and the subsequent replacement of a disciplinary society

by a society of government, in reality one has a triangle, sovereignty-discipline-government, which has as its primary target the population and its essential mechanism the apparatuses of security.”

He also identified three instruments of disciplinary power, derived in large part from the military model: (a) hierarchical observation, or the ability of officials (metaphorically norms of society) to oversee all they control with a single gaze; (b) the ability to make normalizing judgements and to punish those who violate the norms; and (c) use of examination to observe subjects and to make normalizing judgements about them. An examination is a beautiful example of the power-knowledge relationship; those who have the power to give examinations gain additional knowledge and thereby, more power through the imposition of examinations on subjects. Thus, against the enlightenment project of human liberation, progress, objective knowledge and universal truth, Foucault argues that new disciplinary regimes of the 19th century which, for example, sought to reform prisoners rather than punish acts were as repressive as earlier systems and knowledge is a significant field of power with truth inherently being political. As he says:

“Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power.”

7.2.4 Laclou and Mouffe

The works of Ernesto Laclou and Chantal Mouffe constitute the most important part of post-Marxist thought in particular, and postmodernism in general. They argue that there is no such thing as material interests, but only discursively constructed ideas about them. They analyzed and deconstructed the classical Marxian term “class” in an analytical and discursive way. They argued that a unified discourse is almost impossible. Therefore, Marxists should shift their focus from single proletariat discourse to multiple discourses such as women, blacks, immigrants, consumers, ecologists etc. Laclou affirms that the field of cultural struggle has a fundamental role in construction of political identities. They propose a system called “Radical Democracy” in which a new hegemony called the “hegemony of democratic values” will be required. Furthermore, it will require multiplication of democratic practices and their institutionalization through bringing in a variety of democratic struggles like antiracists, anti-capitalists, environmentalists, human rights and civil rights movements under a single roof. Radical democracy retains the objective of abolition of capitalism, but simultaneously asserts that merely abolition of capitalism will not necessarily end the other form of inequalities and exploitations, therefore a broader framework and perspective will be required.

Like the postmodernists, the post Marxism of Laclou and Mouffe asserts that the orthodox/classical Marxism is no longer viable in the modern world. In the light of writings and ideas of Lyotard, Derrida and Foucault, Laclou and Mouffe’s postmodernism exhibits the following characteristics:

- It challenges the enlightenment philosophy advocating essentialism and foundationalism as the basis for human progress and liberation by: (a) regarding an individual not as an absolute, but rather a historically and socially situated being because of which it criticizes the essentialist

conceptions of, for example, femininity and masculinity, insaneness and sanity etc.; and (b) celebrating the anti-foundationalist position, signifying the absence of neutral criteria to establish neutral knowledge and universal truth as the emphasis of enlightenment on reason, science and technology as foundations for human progress and liberation being the product of social engineering (power orientation) are not bringing about human liberation, but rather snatching our freedoms in the name of abnormal, irrational, etc. Moreover, by recognizing the major changes that have occurred in the West, particularly pertaining to the status and role of knowledge, postmodernism questions the applicability of enlightenment principles in the West.

- It regards truth, knowledge, and sciences (in fact, everything whatever in society is) as the products of social construction and therefore associated with power. The critical theorists like Jurgen Habermas and Terry Eagleton question such postmodernist position on the ground that it makes us skeptic about the emancipatory role of social science to be played. Postmodernists like Foucault rebut such charges with the counter-critique that the so-called emancipatory projects generally tend to be less about liberation than the rise of various power-knowledge regimes. Moreover, they insist that postmodernism is not incompatible with the idea of a critical social science so long as it does not entail providing unequivocal epistemological or normative guidelines.
- It rejects what Lyotard calls meta-narratives; that is totalizing theories and structures in favor of what he calls little narratives.
- It rejects given and single meanings and rather gives a space to multiple meanings and interpretations by celebrating differences, relativism, indeterminism and multiple realities, identities, truths and discourses.
- It is not anti-theorization, but does theorization beyond the given and fixed scheme of theorization in a reflexive way.
- It is not anti-reason, but questions the reason by reason in order to deconstruct the binary categorization of rational / irrational for recognizing and celebrating the identity of latter.
- It is not anti-knowledge, but explains the power and market orientation of contemporary knowledge.
- It emphasizes conditionality and historicity of phenomenon and theories.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) Why did Lyotard argue that knowledge has become a commodity?

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2) What is meant by deconstruction?

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7.3 POST MODERNISM AND POST STRUCTURALISM

Postmodernism and post structuralism have a number of similarities.

- Postmodernism (Foucault and Lyotard) is a theory of society, culture and history whereas post structuralism (Derrida) is theory of knowledge and language.
- Postmodernism prefers decentered knowledge whereas poststructuralism includes anti-foundationalism i.e. refutation of the modern search for rational grounds for knowledge and morality; emphasis on construction of meaning and rhetoric in texts; and relation between knowledge and power.
- Post modernism and post structuralism, both are mistrustful about monolithic traditions in social sciences.
- Both reject the project of universal social science.

Therefore, it can be stated that Post-structuralism is a movement in social and political theory within the realm of postmodernism with a wider coverage of cultural and social aspects.

7.4 POST MODERNISM AND GLOBALIZATION

The classical, social and political theory lays a greater emphasis on nation states. Under the umbrella of globalization, the states and societies have undergone fundamental changes. Postmodernism argues that nation states are losing importance under globalization as world is becoming interdependent. The technological and electronic revolution has created heterogeneity, pluralization, individualization, differentiation and fragmentation over homogenization of earlier times. The postmodern world is one where technology within the confines of consumerist capitalism is creating diversity and pluralization. Immanuel Wallerstein argues that the history of the world capitalist system has been trending towards cultural heterogeneity rather than cultural homogenization. Therefore, the processes of fragmentation of the state in the world system along with cultural differentiation are taking place simultaneously.

7.5 CRITICISM

Critics have pointed out that postmodernism has become a grand-narrative in itself and it intensifies problems of personal and social disintegration and despair. Naom Chomsky has even argued that postmodernism is meaningless as it has nothing to add to empirical and analytical knowledge. Pauline Rosenau has highlighted the fact that while postmodernism stresses the irrational, instruments of reason are freely employed to advance its perspective. He further argues that postmodernism criticizes the inconsistency of modernism, but refuses to be held to norms of consistency itself. Some other critiques have pointed out that postmodernism still leaves deeper questions about the roots of oppression and marginalization unanswered.

Check Your Progress 3

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) What do postmodernists say about globalization?

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2) Discuss some points of criticism of postmodernism.

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7.6 LET US SUM UP

In a nutshell, the main features of postmodernism can be summarized as follows:

- It privileges interminancy over finality
- It recognizes that reality is fragmented and disconnected
- Opposes canonical authority
- Emphasizes the free mixture of styles, genres and traditions
- Stresses on conditionality and historicity of theories
- Highlights the process of creation and interpretation instead of staticism
- Its anti-foundational, anti-essentialist and anti-meta-narratives
- Argues that the search of ultimate truth is lost and universal knowledge is only a myth.

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7.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Your answer should highlight following points:
 - Reaction to modernity.
 - First use of the term and used where.
 - Rejection of totalising theories.
 - Names of some post-modernists.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Your answer should include quote cited in the text, highlight how knowledge has become a commodity and is different from knowledge for knowledge's sake.
- 2) Your answer should mention Derrida's book 'Of Grammatology', his quote on destruction cited in the text and highlight how it is a method of reading and reading texts.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Your answer should include decline of the idea of nation-state in an increasingly interdependent world, cultural heterogeneity vs homogeneity and views of Immanuel Wallerstein.
- 2) Your answer should highlight that post-modernism itself is a grand narrative and include views of Naom Chomsky and Pauline Rosenau.